

OBITUARIES



VERA MAE GREEN
1928–1982

There are many of us in the circle of colleagues, students, and friends who grew and benefited from the life and scholarship of Vera Mae Green. "Will the circle be unbroken?" is the question posed in a favorite Black American hymn that celebrates a life while mourning a loss. The question is never answered—directly—but we may join those who sing that song in affirming that as long as the ideas, the values, and the work of that special individual live, then so does she.

The pattern of Vera Green's life and work is interrelated and consistent and thus our tribute is to Vera Green as a person and as an anthropologist. She was born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1928, and was raised in a segment of a Black community which she once referred to as the "rented-room poor" (Green 1972:102). Chicago was also the site of her early education and her

undergraduate studies in sociology and psychology at Roosevelt College. It was in Chicago, too, that Vera Green first learned that there is a diversity in poverty, a lesson repeated and reinforced in her early work experiences and in her fieldwork.

In the early 1950s Vera worked in various social welfare agencies in Chicago: as a group worker, a social welfare aide, and a child welfare worker. From 1958 to 1961 she was a community tenant relations aide and social worker for the Chicago Housing Authority.

Moving to New York City, another major city of ethnic diversity, and, as she would argue, of diversity among its poor, Vera began her formal studies of anthropology at Columbia and received a master's degree in 1955. Under the direction of E. Padilla and Charles Wagley, she studied the relationship between social stress and health and disease in New York's East Harlem.

In 1956, Vera trained in community development in Mexico, and worked in a Mestizo community. (That work was the basis of the UNESCO title she held of Fundamental Educator.) In 1963, she served as one of Oscar Lewis's research assistants in a study of an urban poor area in Puerto Rico. When Vera Green analyzed communities of the poor—the strengths as well as the problems, the diversities as well as the similarities—she was in the position to speak of what she knew and had been a part of.

Continuing her studies of anthropology at the University of Arizona, Vera received the Ph.D. in 1969. Her doctoral fieldwork and dissertation were carried out on the Caribbean island of Aruba, under the direction of E. H. Spicer, with H. T. Getty and E. P. Dozier serving as committee members.

In a comprehensive review and analysis of "Anthropology and the Black Experience," St. Clair Drake noted the significance of Vera Green's work on Aruba. Reminding us that up to 1945, only ten Afro-Americans had received professional training in anthropology; by 1965 there were no more than six who were employed as full-time anthropologists; and in 1980, there were less than 100 Afro-Americans with a master's degree or Ph.D. in the discipline, Drake said this of Vera Green's work:

Well into the 1960s she was the only Afro-American anthropologist who was a Caribbeanist. There were very few West Indian anthropologists of color either. . . . When Vera

Green . . . chose the Caribbean she was breaking new ground; when she chose the Dutch Caribbean it put her into the category of the unusual. [1980:24]

Indeed, Vera's work was and remains unusual. Her doctoral dissertation on Aruba, revised and published as a book in 1974 under the title, *Migrants in Aruba*, did not conform to the traditional pattern of anthropological studies of a single group of people. Aruba, a multiethnic and multiracial setting had to be understood, Vera Green insisted, in terms of the ways in which various groups were integrated into that society. Thus she contributed one of the earliest anthropological studies of the overall ethnic relations of a Caribbean area; she illustrated the presence of integration, on an individual basis and in terms of the articulation of ethnic groups—whereas most studies concentrated on disintegration and conflict in the Caribbean; and with reference to the specific history and social structure of the island, she argued that, contrary to the dominant view in Caribbean scholarship, ethnicity was more important than race in interactions among the various groups in Aruban society.

Vera's interest in the Caribbean and Latin American continued throughout her career. Following teaching appointments at the University of Iowa and the University of Houston, in 1972 she joined the anthropology faculty at Rutgers, where she served as graduate director, and as chairperson. From 1976 until her death, she was also the director of the Latin American Institute.

Vera Green's fieldwork, publications, speeches, and unpublished manuscripts encompassed a number of areas: aging and the aged, international human rights, migration, Afro-American family studies, voluntary associations, Caribbean studies, and applied anthropology. However, the issue of diversity among Black American and other poor populations was clearly the area of deepest and most longstanding interest to her.

A fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton at the time of her death, Vera planned to complete a manuscript that looked at various communities of the poor in which she had done fieldwork: Puerto Rican communities on the island and in New York City; communities in rural areas and towns in Mexico; and communities of southern Afro-Americans living in Houston and Chicago. A second manuscript was to have been based on a reorganization of

data which she had collected in Houston and Chicago. She did not complete the final draft of that book, but the significance of what she intended to do remains with us. Her intention was to establish what she called a baseline for socio-cultural variations among United States Blacks; a task which she viewed as a prerequisite for determining the specific implications of diversity among Afro-Americans for national and local policies. In Vera's words,

current considerations of "U.S. Blacks" are dangerously oversimplified, i.e., northern vs. southern or rural vs. urban at most. In my opinion, this oversimplification at the national and central policy-making levels has negative implications or at best limitations when applied at the regional and local levels in areas of health, education and general social welfare. . . . [Green 1981:1]

In a 1970 publication, Vera had addressed another dangerously simplified view of Afro-American communities. The failure of most anthropological studies of Black culture to recognize the diversity in these communities had to be challenged, she argued; for the almost exclusive emphasis on one sector of poor Afro-American life (what she called the multi-problem poor) produces a distortion of the realities of Afro-American life and public policies are then constructed on "the stereotype of needy Blacks" (1970:271).

Vera pointed out a relationship between misguided research on Black communities and career choices of Afro-American youth. The misrepresentation of all Afro-American culture as that of a poor lumpen strata encourages young people to shun the sciences, classical music, anthropology, and many other disciplines and careers because they are not portrayed as what "real" Black people do.

Vera Green was a strong advocate of anthropology, and she devoted a good deal of her energies to service work associated with the profession. She served on the Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association and she was president of the Association of Black Anthropologists. In addition she was active in many other professional organizations including the Society for Applied Anthropology (serving as the U.S. program chairperson in 1975); and the Mid-Atlantic Council for Latin American Studies (serving at one time on the executive committee). From 1976 to 1979, she was the convenor of Quaker anthropologists.

In each of these organizational settings, Vera Green tried to actively encourage Afro-American and other Third World people to pursue careers in anthropology. She clearly set an example as she supported and encouraged Black, Puerto Rican, and other minority students to enter the discipline and as she pushed the few of us in the field to make our presence known.

From its inception, Vera Green was the spiritual force of the Association of Black Anthropologists (ABA), serving as its president from 1977 to 1979, and receiving a service award from that association in 1980. Those of us who worked with her in the ABA have many special memories. With particularly deep affection we recall a weekend executive committee meeting of the ABA at her home in 1979. We saw her among the things that she loved to listen to, and see, and do. Shortly before we arrived at her home, she had returned from a karate session, and still in the clothes of that art, she gave into our pressure for a demonstration of her skills as a black belt. As she performed the finishing touches on a full spread of "soul food," where only the most obsessively curious would know how many health foods she had substituted for the traditional ones, she responded to our inquiries about the artwork which surrounded us in her home. There were pieces from many parts of Europe and from Africa, from the Caribbean and from the United States—and Vera Green was at ease among all of it, as she was when she walked among peoples of different places. And if we did not ask questions about her particular records that were being played, then Vera gave us a few steps and minilectures on the son and the rumba that she was so fond of.

Vera Green died on January 17, 1982. When I visited her on December 19, she was weakened from a long battle against cancer, but she spoke passionately about our discipline, about the work she so much wanted to complete, and about the many friends and colleagues whose love and concern encircled her.

JOHNNETTA B. COLE
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

REFERENCES CITED

Drake, St. Clair

1980 Anthropology and the Black Experience. *The Black Scholar* 11(4):2-39.

Green, Vera M.

1981 Project Description. Unpublished manuscript, pp. 1-4.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF VERA MAE GREEN

- 1970 The Confrontation of Diversity within the Black Community. *Human Organization* 29(4):267-272.
- 1972 Comments on Charles Valentine, Racism and Recent Anthropological Study of U.S. Blacks. *Human Organization* 31(1):102.
- 1973 Methodological Problems Involved in the Study of the Aruban Family. In *Proceedings of the 2nd Conference on the Family in the Caribbean*. S. Gerber, ed. pp. 17-29. Puerto Rico: Institute for Caribbean Studies.
- 1974 Migrants in Aruba. Assen: Van Gorcum.
- 1975 Racial vs. Ethnic Factors in Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean Migration. In *Migration, Change and Development: Implications for Ethnic Identity and Political Conflict*. Helen Safa and Brian duToit, eds. pp. 83-96. The Hague: Mouton.
- 1977 Review of Muraskin. *The Black Middle Class: Good Guys or Bad?* Reviews in Anthropology 4(5):483-502.
- 1978a Review of Said and Simmons, *Ethnicity in an International Context, The Politics of Disassociation*. *International Migration Review* 12:590-592.
- 1978b The Black Extended Family in the United States: Some Research Suggestions. In *The Extended Family in Black Societies*. D. B. Shimkin, E. M. Shimkin, and D. A. Frate, eds. pp. 379-387. The Hague: Mouton.
- 1980 (coedited with Jack Nelson) *International Human Rights: Contemporary Perspectives*. New York: Earl M. Coleman Enterprises.
- 1981 U.S. Blacks: The Creation of an Enduring People? In *Persistent Peoples: Cultural Enclaves in Perspective*. G. Kushner and C. P. Castile, eds. pp. 69-77 Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- In Press Review of E. L. Fry, ed., *Aging in Culture and Society: Comparative Viewpoints and Strategies*. *American Anthropologist*.
- In Press *Dominica*. In *Political Parties of the Americas*. Robert J. Alexander, ed. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood.